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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002101

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL, PRM; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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SUBJECT: Voting with their feet on the peace process, returns by displaced persons spike up

Refs: (A) Colombo 2086; (B) Colombo 1619

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Returns of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to points of origin in Sri Lanka have surged, with a large percentage of the 213,000 total returns this year transiting in the past eight weeks alone. Most of the returns are to points in Jaffna, but many have returned to the Tiger-controlled Wanni region. The upward trend seems closely entwined with growth of confidence in the peace process. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) There has been a surge in returns of IDPs to their points of origin in Sri Lanka. From early September to November 1, there have been 86,000 IDP returnees, according to UNHCR. Before September, there had been 127,000 returns since the year began. The grand total for 2002 is 213,000. UNHCR reports that it expects the numbers of returns to climb significantly further in November.

3. (U) More than half of the returnees have transited to points in Jaffna District. About a third of the returnees have gone to points in Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi Districts, which are under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). A much smaller group of returnees has gone back to Mannar District in the north and Trincomalee District in the east, which are both under a patchwork of government and LTTE control.

4. (U) UNHCR reports that there remain about 600,000 IDPs in Sri Lanka. Most of these are in camps scattered throughout the country, but some are staying with family members. Most IDPs are Tamils, as are the vast majority of returnees. Very few of the Muslim IDPs ejected from Jaffna in the early 1990s by the LTTE have returned. UNHCR also reports that only a small handful of the approximately 100,000 refugees in India have returned. In addition, there is no sign that large numbers of the estimated 750,000 Tamil expatriates who left since the war began in 1983 have returned. (Note: Many of these Tamils settled in Canada, Australia, the UK, and elsewhere in Europe. A good percentage are professionals.)

5. (C) The recent surge in returns seems directly linked with positive news on the peace track. Commenting along such lines, N. Raviraj, a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MP from Jaffna, told us that the returnees he has met have expressed optimism that the peace process was here to stay. (Note: Raviraj's war-torn home area of Chavakachcheri has received many returnees.) This sense of optimism has sharply increased with the start of peace talks between the government and the LTTE in mid-September. Raviraj said he expected that the returns would continue to grow given the positive coverage generated by the second session of peace talks (See Ref A).

6. (C) Queried about the large number of returns to LTTE areas, Raviraj noted that the choice of many returnees to go there probably had to do with the growth of confidence in the ongoing ceasefire. (Note: Areas now controlled by the LTTE in the north were the site of frequent and often large-scale fighting.) He did not think it had anything to do with a spurt in support for the LTTE. Raviraj related that the LTTE was trying to be as helpful as possible to the returnees by offering them some assistance, as well as land to farm. He noted, however, that many of the returnees were very poor, barely scratching out an existence.

7. (C) COMMENT: The UNHCR has classified the vast majority of the returnees as "spontaneous," i.e., they just got up and left without much in the way of support from the government or anyone else. The UNHCR, in fact, has basically advised IDPs to stay put until more landmines are pulled from the ground and the peace

process creates an even more settled situation. The fact that the returnees are going back under such conditions -- and despite the UN's advice -- is a sign of the high degree of enthusiasm the peace process has stimulated. Further progress on the peace track could trigger a veritable stampede of returnees. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS